

# INDIA AFTER 25 YEARS

(A Talk by E. M. FORSTER in  
the BBC Home Service)

IT was a dull, cold Friday morning in October when I left England. Two days later, on the Sunday afternoon, I was in India. Below me lay the desert of Rajputana, baked by the sun and blotched with the shadows of clouds. The plane came down for half-an-hour near the dragon-shaped fort of Jodhpur, then took off again, and it was Delhi. I felt dazed. And we had travelled so fast that he were ahead of schedule, and had no one to meet us. Suddenly very slow, instead of very quick, we jogged in a tonga through the Delhi bazaars, our luggage in front, our legs hanging down behind, the dust rising, the sun setting, the smoke drifting out of the little shops. It became dark and the sky was covered with stars. Were we lost? No. An unknown host, an Indian, received us, and next day I stood on the high platform of the Great Mosque, one of the noblest buildings in India and the world. Profound thankfulness filled me. The sky was now intensely blue, the kites circled round and round the pearl-grey domes and the red frontispiece of sandstone, sounds drifted up from Delhi city, the pavement struck warm through the soles of my socks; I was back in the country I loved, after an absence of twenty-five years.

Had she changed in the interval? A good deal. But I must explain why I went out. I went to a conference of Indian writers. There is an international society of writers called the P.E.N. Club—you may know the name—and the All-India centre of the P.E.N. had invited out the secretary and myself to visit their country. Of course the Government approved the journey, or I couldn't have gone. But I was a free agent, and I hadn't to report to anyone on my return to England.

As to the people I met: they were nearly all Indians, of the professional classes—doctors, lawyers, public servants, professors at the university, business men. Many of them were old friends or the sons of old friends. They were what is termed "intellectuals" and they lived in towns. I did not see much of the countryside nor of the industrial conditions. I met a few Englishmen, but not many, and have often looked round a crowded room and observed that I was the only Westerner in it. Such are my credentials for talking to you about



"Politics occupy them passionately and constantly." Here a Bombay crowd welcomes Jawaharal Nehru back from a political conference

India, or, if you prefer to put it another way, such are my limitations.

## The Big Change

Well, the big change I noticed was the increased interest in politics. I talked politics out there as little as I could, and am not going to talk them now, but you cannot understand the modern Indians unless you realise that politics occupy them passionately and constantly, that artistic problems, and even social problems—yes, and economic problems—are subsidiary. Their attitude is "first we must find the correct political solution, and then we can deal with other matters." I think the attitude is unsound, and used to say so; still, there it is, and they hold it much more vehemently than they did a quarter of a century ago. When I spoke about the necessity of form in literature and the importance of the individual vision, their attention wandered, although they listened politely. Literature, in their view, should expound or inspire a political creed.

Externally the place has not changed. It looks much as it did, from the train. Outside the carriage windows (the rather dirty windows) it unrolls as before—monotonous, enigmatic, and at moments sinister. And in some long motor drives which I took through the Deccan there were the same combination of hill, rock, bushes, ruins, dusty people and occasional yellow flowers which I encountered when I walked on the soil in my youth. There is still poverty, and, since I am older to-day and more thoughtful, it is the poverty, the malnutrition which persists like a ground-swell beneath the pleasant froth of my immediate experience. I do not know what political solution is correct. But I do know that people ought not to be so poor and to look so ill, and that rats ought not to run about them as I saw them doing in a labour camp at Bombay. Industrialism has increased, though it does not dominate the landscape yet as it does in the West. You can see the chimneys of the cotton

mills at Ahmadabad, but you can see its mosques too. You can see little factories near Calcutta, but they are tucked away amongst bananas and palms, and the one I have in mind has an enormous tree overhanging it, in whose branches a witch is said to sit, and from whose branches anyhow huge fruit occasionally fall and hit the corrugated iron roofs with a bang, so that the factory hands jump. No—externally India has not changed. And this changelessness in her is called by some observers "the real India." I don't myself like the phrase "the real India." I suspect it. It always makes me prick up my ears. But you can use it if you want to, either for the changes in her or for the unchanged. "Real" is at the service of all schools of thought.

## Veils Gone

It is when you leave the country, or the streets of the town, and go into the private houses, that you begin to notice a second great alteration, second only to politics—namely, the lifting of the purdah, the increasing emancipation of women. It struck me particularly in cities which are largely Mohammedan, such as Lahore and Hyderabad, where women once kept rigidly behind the veil. I have been in my life three times to Hyderabad; some of my happiest Indian days were spent there, so I have been able to trace this change. My first visit was in 1912 and then I saw scarcely any Indian women. My second visit was in 1921, when I was admitted into some family circles and saw a good deal of what may be called "semi-purdah"—ladies coming out into company, but not coming avowedly, and retiring at any moment behind the veil if they felt disposed to do so. To-day, purdah has broken down at Hyderabad, except amongst the most conservative, and at the receptions to which I went the women sometimes outnumbered the men. Since they kept to their lovely Indian saris, the effect was exquisite; it was a delight to look round at so much gracefulness and graciousness, at so many and

such well-chosen colours. I don't know how far into society this lifting of the veil has extended. But I imagine that sooner or later the change will extend to the villages and transform the Indian social fabric from top to bottom. Our world does not go back, though whether it progresses God alone knows, and in India, as in the West, women will shortly have the same opportunities as men for good and for evil.

The receptions I have been mentioning usually took the form of buffet dinners—they are an innovation since my time. Long tables are loaded with Indian food, and sometimes one table is labelled "vegetarian" and the other "non-vegetarian." You help yourself, or are helped. I take away pleasant memories of these buffet dinners, memories of Indians moving elegantly through well-filled rooms with well-filled plates in their hands, and miraculously conveying food to their mouths in the folds of a chapatti. What about rationing? Well, there is rationing, but its workings are mysterious and I did not grasp them or suffer from them. It is obvious that for the well-to-do life is much easier in India than in England. The shops are full of tinned delicacies for those who can afford them—butter, cheese, even plum puddings, and all without points. For the poor, life is much harder there than here.

## Indian English

The Indians I met mostly talked English. Some of them spoke very well, and one or two of them write in our language with great distinction. But I think that English, though more widely spoken than on my last visit, is worse spoken, that more mistakes are made in it, and that the pronunciation is deteriorating. "Perpendicular" for "perpendicular," "Pip" into my office for "pop." Here are two tiny slips which I noted in a couple of minutes, and both of them made by well-educated men. The explanation, I think, is that Indians at the schools and universities are now learning their English from other Indians, instead of from